

2023 Major Review of Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL)

FAQs

What is the ASCL?

The scope of the Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL) allows for all languages. In practice, only those languages widely spoken are made visible as a separate category in the classification. As languages become more prevalent in Australia, they can be added to the classification to support the ongoing measurement of diversity and changes in languages spoken in Australia.

The ASCL is designed to be used in the collection, aggregation and dissemination of data relating to languages spoken in Australia and to classify the language(s) spoken at home variables contained within the [Language Standards](#).

Changes to the [Language Standards](#) are being considered in the [2026 Census Topic Consultation](#) process which is a separate process to the Language Review.

How is the Classification structured?

The ASCL has a three-level hierarchical structure that consists of Broad Groups, Narrow Groups and Languages.

Broad Group level

The Broad Group level (one-digit level) is the highest and most general level of the classification. Broad Groups are formed by aggregating geographically proximate narrow groups. The ASCL has nine Broad Groups:

1. Northern European languages
2. Southern European languages
3. Eastern European languages
4. Southwest and Central Asian languages
5. Southern Asian languages
6. Southeast Asian languages
7. Eastern Asian languages
8. Australian Indigenous languages
9. Other languages

Narrow Group level

The second level of the classification lists the Narrow Groups. These are generally represented by a 2-digit code. The ASCL contains 51 Narrow Groups similar in terms of the classification criteria (genetic affinity and geographic proximity). Narrow Groups are composed of one or more Languages (4-digit level).

The only exception to the above standard (Narrow Groups having 2-digit codes) is Broad Group 8, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages*. Part of this group has a four-level hierarchy, due to the addition of several 3-digit Narrow Groups. The three Narrow Groups divided into 3-digit categories are:

- 81 Arnhem Land and Daly River Region Languages

- 82 Yolngu Matha and
- 86 Arandic

Languages

The third and most detailed level of the classification consists of 435 Languages (4-digit level), including 217 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages. An example of how the classification hierarchy works is provided in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Representation of Northern European languages in the ASCL

Broad Group	Narrow Group	Languages
1 Northern European languages	11 Celtic	
		1101 Gaelic (Scotland)
		1102 Irish
		1103 Welsh
		1199 Celtic, nec

Table 2: Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in the ASCL

Broad Group	Narrow Groups	Languages
8 Australian Indigenous languages	82 Yolngu Matha	
		821 Dhangu
		8211 Galpu
		8212 Golumala
		8213 Wangurri
		8219 Dhangu, nec

How is a Language defined?

There are many different ways people define language. In the ASCL, the official definition from the Macquarie Dictionary is used. According to the Macquarie Dictionary a Language is a distinctly human way of communicating using voice, writing or sign language that is understood by others. Computer coding languages are excluded from the ASCL.

What is a dialect?

As used in the ASCL, a dialect can be defined as a regional or social variety of a language distinguished by pronunciation, grammar, and/or vocabulary from its parent language. Some dialects have been individually specified within the ASCL based on user needs.

What is a Pidgin?

As used in the ASCL, a pidgin can be defined as a language used for communication between groups having different first languages, as between European traders or colonisers and Indigenous peoples, and which typically has features deriving from each of those languages.

What is a Creole?

As used in the ASCL, a creole can be defined as a language which has developed from a pidgin to become the primary language of a community.

What is the difference between a sign language and a signed language?

Sign languages (e.g. Auslan) are languages in their own right, with distinct grammar and vocabulary, compared with spoken languages. In the ASCL, sign languages are currently included in Narrow Group 97. Signed languages are those that directly represent a spoken language; and are not currently included in the ASCL.

What are the Language Standards?

The [ABS Language Standards](#) outline methods for collecting, processing and presenting data on languages spoken in Australia. There are five Language Standards in total.

1. First Language Spoken
2. Languages Spoken at Home
3. Main Language Other Than English Spoken at Home
4. Main Language Spoken at Home, and
5. Proficiency in Spoken English.

The ABS Language Standards can be used alone and are also part of the wider framework, [ABS Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity](#) (SSCLD). The Standards have been designed and developed by the ABS in collaboration with other organisations to support a nationally consistent approach for the collection and dissemination of data on cultural and language diversity. The Standards used by ABS Census of Population and Housing: *Main Language Other Than English Spoken at Home* and *Proficiency in Spoken English* are part of the Minimum Core Set of Cultural and Language Indicators. Any updates to the ABS Language Standards will be considered during the [2026 Census topic review](#).

Why does the ASCL need to be updated?

While the current version of the ASCL had some minor updates in 2016 and 2011, it largely reflects the social environment in Australia at that time it was originally developed (1997). The Australian community has changed considerably over this time and the ASCL needs to be reviewed to reflect this. The ABS has also received feedback from individuals and organisations identifying areas that need to be revised. Data from the 2021 Census will further inform the review.

How is the scope of the review determined?

The ABS is embarking on a major review of ASCL. The updated ASCL is currently scheduled for release in October 2024. Any changes to the ASCL will also reflect outcomes of the 2026 Census Topic Review process.

The ABS has proposed the initial areas that are in-scope of this review, please see the 2023 ASCL Review Scope, and are based on:

- Feedback already received from individuals and organisations.
- Research into how people have responded to the Language questions in previous Censuses.

- Issues identified through standard classification maintenance processes, including consideration of the classification criteria.
- Comparison with other Language classifications used by demographically similar countries and organisations (e.g. StatsCan and StatsNZ).

The ABS is seeking your feedback on the initial areas proposed as in-scope of the ASCL review and to help identify any other areas that should be considered. For more information on the scope of the review, see the document *Major Review of the Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL) Scope*, available on the **Consultation Hub** in the **Related** section of the **Overview** page.

What is the impact on official statistics?

When there are changes to a classification, data produced using that classification may not be directly comparable over time. The ABS provides concordance files and supporting documentation to make sure you can understand how changes to the classification will impact data produced from one point in time to another.

A second round of public consultation in 2024 will outline the proposed changes to the ASCL. This consultation process will provide an opportunity for individuals and organisations to provide feedback on the proposed changes before they are implemented.

How do I provide feedback?

You can provide feedback by making a submission via the [ABS Consultation Hub](#).

How will the information in my submission be used?

The information you provide in your submission will be used to inform the review and preparation for the 2026 Census. More information about how ABS manages privacy can be found here [Privacy at the ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)

What happens after the Consultation hub closes?

After the Consultation Hub closes, all submissions will be reviewed. The ABS may contact submission authors for more information if they have agreed to be contacted. The ABS will also seek feedback on the proposed changes to the ASCL in 2024.

Any further questions?

Please email standards@abs.gov.au with any questions on this consultation or for further information.